

THE SHADOW OF

CHRIST

IN THE LAW OF

MOSES

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כא-הענה בדעך עד שיקר

VERN S. POYTHRESS

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P U B L I S H I N G
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This book is dedicated to the Jews

and

to my children, Ransom and Justin,
to whom God has given through Moses a
most wonderful story in pictures.

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PREFACE

To Jews who read my book I would like to give a special message: I love you. Through your ancestors and through your people I received the most beautiful book in the world, the Bible. Through that book I came to know the true God, the God of your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am one of those people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised in the Torah and the Prophets. Through Jesus I have come to know about the Torah that God gave to Moses and to submit to it. I am deeply sorry for the harm that has come to your people through Christians who thought that they were serving Jesus. I am convinced that they were doing the very opposite of what He commanded.

In this book I tell part of my story. Doubtless you will not agree with some of the things that I say. I am sorry if anything offends you; I do not intend it. I would kindly ask you to keep reading. I think that you will find a good deal of interest to you, because I am writing about the most precious heritage of the Jews, the Torah. I am writing primarily to those who accept the New Testament as part of God's word, and so I sometimes appeal to portions of the New Testament. Nevertheless, the essential parts of my argument do not depend on the New Testament but only on the Old Testament, the Bible of the Jews. It will help if you keep in mind that the Bible of the Jews contains many promises looking forward to a great future time of salvation for Israel (see Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-16; Ezekiel 34:17-31; 36:1-38; Isaiah 40-66). At that time the Messiah, the Son of David, will come, and the majesty and glory of God will be openly revealed (Isaiah 40:5; Habakkuk 2:14; Zechariah

14:9). The law and the prophets were never intended to be the whole of God's communication to the world, but only the first half of it. If I am right in thinking that the New Testament completes the story that God began in the Old Testament, it is quite proper for me to look back now in the light of the full story and see what more I can learn from its first half. If you do not accept my view of the New Testament, you must still ask yourself what that first half points forward to.

My thanks are due to my friends Edmund P. Clowney, John M. Frame, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Meredith G. Kline, Greg L. Bahnsen, James B. Jordan, Steven M. Schlei, and Gary North for helping me to love God's law. I would like to indicate also my appreciation for the late Geerhardus Vos and for Rousas J. Rushdoony, whom I have not met personally, but who introduced some of the ideas that led to the present discussion. My apologies are extended to all these men for any way in which I may have underestimated the insights of their positions in the past or even in the present book. The more I have worked on these issues, the more I have appreciated their depth. I have not always found it easy to interpret what people are saying on these issues within the context in which they intended it and above all in the context of the unsearchable divine wisdom of God's word.

PART ONE

UNDERSTANDING THE
DIFFERENT ASPECTS
OF THE LAW

ONE

THE CHALLENGE OF THE LAW OF MOSES: INTERPRETING MOSES IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

When I was a teenager, an older Christian woman learned that I had read the entire Bible during the preceding year. She came up to me and asked, “How did you get through the Book of Leviticus?” I didn’t really know what to say to her in return. I knew what she meant. Parts of the Old Testament were difficult for me too. Somehow the Lord had given me sufficient motivation and interest to read the whole Bible. But how was I to help her? And how could I learn to appreciate the difficult parts better myself? What were she and I supposed to be learning from Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy?

I did not learn the answer until years later. The answer came to me through another story, not the story of my life, but the story of two other people with struggles like my own.

The Challenge of the Old Testament

Long ago in Palestine two disciples of Jesus were walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). A stranger joined them. He asked them about the things they had been through, and they began

to explain. They were heartbroken because the master and friend in whom they had put all their hopes was dead. But the stranger said some strange things to comfort them. Instead of sympathizing, He said, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25). The disciples' real problem was not with a dead master but with themselves. They did not understand the Old Testament. And so the stranger helped them to understand. "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). The stranger, of course, was Jesus Christ, the master Teacher of the Old Testament. What did Jesus tell those two disciples? We do not know the details. But we do know the heart of His teaching: "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26).

Even before Jesus was finished, and even before He revealed who He was, a remarkable transformation began to take place in the hearts of the disciples. They said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). The Old Testament Scriptures began to open up to them, and they were awed, amazed, and overwhelmed all at once.

Later on Jesus appeared to a larger group of His disciples. He continued teaching along the same line:

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:45-49)

Christ enabled the disciples to understand not merely the implications of a few passages of the Old Testament, but "the Scriptures"—the whole Old Testament. What do these Scriptures really say? Christ introduces His explanation with the words, "This is what is written" (Luke 24:46). That is, He promises to give them the substance and heart of what is written in the Old Testament. What He says next contains His answer: "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on

the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47).¹

The whole Old Testament finds its focus in Jesus Christ, His death, and His resurrection. The Apostle Paul says the same thing in different words: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 1:20). “These things [in the Old Testament] happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17–18).

Basic Principles for Interpreting the Old Testament

A great heritage awaits us in the Old Testament. But how do we unlock it? Christ Himself is the key that unlocks the riches of the Old Testament. Let us see how.

First of all, Christ is the all-glorious Lord, the only Son of the Father, who from all eternity beholds the Father face to face, who is with God and who is God (John 1:1). Every word of the Old Testament is the word of God Himself (2 Timothy 3:16–17), and God is the trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus all of the Old Testament is Christ’s word to us, as well as God the Father’s word to us.

Second, the Old Testament teaches us about Christ. Such is one main implication of the story in Luke 24. Christ is the focus of the message of the Old Testament. He is the One to whom it points forward, about whom it speaks, and whom it prefigures in symbols.

Third, Christ not only instructs us but establishes communion with us through His word. We abide in Christ as His word abides in us (John 15:7). As the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, we find that we are meeting Christ, and He talks to us very personally through the Bible, including the Old Testament.

Fourth, Christ changes us and transforms us through His word. As we meet with Christ and experience His glory, we are transformed into His image. The Bible says that we start out with a lack of understanding of the Old Testament, due to hard hearts (Luke 24:25; 2 Corinthians 4:4). This lack is like a veil over our hearts, keeping us from seeing it correctly (2 Corinthians 3:14–15). When we turn to the Lord, the Holy Spirit works in us and the veil over our hearts is removed (2 Corinthians 3:16–17). Then we see the true glory of Christ. “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Fifth, as our hearts are changed we begin to respond to Christ in adoration, thankfulness, and obedience. Christ is our Lord, our master, and that means that we must obey Him. But Christ is also our beloved, and that means that we come to love to please Him and obey Him (John 14:15, 23). Our response ought not to be a reluctant, grumbling obedience, but joyful, enthusiastic obedience. And so it will be more and more, if we belong to Him and have fellowship with Him, because Christ writes His own law on our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3, 6; Hebrews 10:16).

Thus when we read the Old Testament we should pray that Christ will both enlighten us and transform us. Because the Old Testament as well as the New is Christ’s word, we should believe what God teaches there, obey what He commands, and give thanks for the blessings and communion that He gives. Above all, we should endeavor to search out how the Old Testament speaks of Christ.

We need to keep in mind two final key elements: humility and love. We are beset by sin and our understanding will be imperfect as long as we are in this life (1 Corinthians 13:12). We must be humble enough not to overestimate our abilities. We must realize that God’s thoughts are above our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9), and that we will never come to the bottom of their unsearchable depths (Romans 11:33–36). In Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). We should come to Christ for all enlightenment. But when we do so, we also acknowledge “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18). Paul prays for us “to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of

all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19). Truly Christ's love surpasses knowledge, and we adore Him in awe rather than come to a complete mastery of what we study.

Because of our limitations we must also be deeply grateful for insights that God provides through other human beings who study the Bible. When we differ with others in our understanding of Scripture, we must be willing to defend its precious central truths, but we must also be willing to listen to others in love (Ephesians 4:12–16). We may not always be right, and even when we are right, we may have something to learn from other people who have seen some other aspect of the infinite depth of God's truth.

In particular, we must be ready to learn something from the Israelites of long ago. God did not begin to exercise His wisdom or care with us today. He started long ago, even at creation. Through many generations He dealt patiently with people in circumstances very different from ours, and He proved Himself faithful. Again and again He spoke to them about Christ in symbols and shadows that were appropriate to them and their circumstances rather than immediately to our circumstances. That is why the Old Testament is so remarkably unlike the New Testament in some ways. Yet because the same God and the same Christ are proclaimed in both, they are also remarkably alike in their overall thrust.

If we have humility about ourselves and enough love to look beyond ourselves to other people's situations, we can begin to appreciate how God dealt with the Israelites in the Old Testament, and how things looked from their point of view. Then we gain understanding of what God really said in the Old Testament, as opposed to ideas that we might fancifully impose on the Old Testament out of our own imaginations.

Thus we have a threefold task. First, we must try to understand the law of Moses on its own terms, within its own historical environment. God intended it to be heard and understood by Israelites who had recently been redeemed from Egypt. Second, we must try to understand how the New Testament completes God's story and God's word that He began to speak in the Old Testament. Third, we must obey and apply God's word to ourselves and our own circumstances. Often Biblical

scholars stop with the first step. But it is legitimate to read the first part of the story again in the light of the end. By doing so we may understand more clearly how the beginning already introduced the teachings and the tensions that are completed and resolved at the end. Jesus Christ Himself is the center of New Testament revelation. Since the New Testament completes the story begun in the Old, Christ is also the center about which the Old Testament begins to speak in its preliminary way, and to which the Old Testament points forward.

In addition, it is spiritually vital for us to obey and apply God's word. Jesus Christ is still our Lord today, and we acknowledge Him as Lord not only by receiving His blessings with thanksgiving but by wholeheartedly obeying Him.²

So let us take a journey, back, back, in time and space to the Near East, to the days when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and taught them in the wilderness. These people were like all people in their hearts, but some of their experiences were very different from our own. They lived in tents. They herded cattle and sheep. They lived in the open air a lot. The sun, the moon, the stars, the clouds, the trees, and the land were their companions. Above all, they had experienced a miraculous visit from God Himself, who had brought them out of miserable bondage and slavery in Egypt through their deliverer, Moses. Let us go back and hear what God said to them.